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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 28 (Pentecost 24), Series A
Saturday, November 18th, 2017
Sunday, November 19th, 2017

Sermon: God's Return
Texts: Matthew 25:14-30

Focus Statement: God graciously entrusts his world to our stewardship and care.

Function Statement: That they would gladly serve the master for his glory.

Sermon Structure: Story Applied

Doctrinal Locus: "On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ" (SC, 3rd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Today's Gospel lesson, the Parable of the Talents, is the second in a series of three parables Jesus tells to teach about the end of the world. Yet before we proceed further, we need to clarify some things by defining what a talent was, especially during our stewardship series on time, talents, and treasures. In modern English parlance, a "talent" is a special gift or ability that someone uses in their work or hobbies, perhaps even in service of God and the Church. But in the ancient world, the word talent was a measure of weight, particularly for large sums of money. A talent of silver was worth about twenty years' wages for a common laborer. So the amounts of money mentioned in the parable: 5 talents, 2 talents, and 1 talent are tremendous

sums, equating to 100 years, 40 years, and 20 years' worth of wages.

Clearly, the Master is a man of immense wealth... as well as immense trust to hand over that much money to his servants for management.

But the most difficult aspect of this parable, as I see it, is that it tends to create the impression that our favor and standing before God rest on our good works. After all, the first two servants who work hard and make more money for the Master are the ones who are rewarded. But the one who produces nothing at all is called wicked and lazy and cast into "the outer darkness," a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:30, ESV), which is one of Jesus' favorite descriptions of hell in Matthew's Gospel (cp. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51).¹ As a result, we may be tempted to believe that our place in heaven is based on *performance*. Much like the world we live in now, perhaps the afterlife is a place where you get what you pay for and pay for what you do. Other ways to express the point of the parable might be as follows:

- Use it or lose it!

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

- If you don't produce, he'll cut you loose!
- Better bear fruit, or you'll get the boot!

All those mantras are catchy because they rhyme, yet none of them is true. As Christians, we instinctively bristle against such interpretations, rightly believing what Scripture teaches: that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone *apart from works* of the Law (cf. Eph. 2:8-9). We are *Gospel* people! So what are we to make of all this?

As we hear the Parable of the Talents, we must recognize that the Master is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, a gentle and humble man whose “yoke is easy” and whose “burden is light” (Matt. 11:30). At the Last Supper in the upper room, Jesus got down on his hands and knees, wrapped a towel around his waist, and washed his disciples’ feet, doing the menial labor of a slave, even though he himself was their Teacher. Indeed, Jesus came not to *be* served, but *to* serve—and to give his life as a ransom for many, dying on the cross for our sins. Clearly, we have a kind and loving Master who cares only for us and our fellow slaves.

Jesus is a loving Lord who has already done so much good for us, forgiving our sins, giving us eternal life and salvation, that we would gladly and tirelessly labor for him. We are not ashamed to call ourselves the Lord's servants, or even his slaves, because of the kind of Master he is.

And because Jesus loves us so much, he also trusts us. In the parable, the Master entrusted huge amounts of money to his servants. So also Jesus has entrusted to us the stewardship of time, talent, and treasure. He gives us talents and abilities, wealth and other material blessings, our time on earth, and even the care of the whole world. Truly, these gifts belong to God. He is the owner, and we are the managers. Yet because of our great love for the God who first loved us, our joy overflows in service to Christ and his Kingdom. The spontaneous fruit of faith is always love and good works, because faith without works is dead (James 2).

That is why the first two slaves were eager beavers when it came to the Lord's service. Their eagerness to serve was born out of gratitude, not fear or coercion. The one with five talents *immediately* "went at

once and... made five talents more” (Matt. 25:17). The one with two did the same. Each of the slaves had different gifts and abilities, so God entrusted different amounts to them—“each according to his ability” (25:15). But both of the first two slaves made a wonderful return on God’s gift. And notice how the Master delighted in blessing them *exactly the same*: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of the Master” (25:21, 23). Even though one slave made more money than the other, Jesus blesses them the same, because his love for all of his servants is the same. (See how this helps to underscore God’s free grace and not our own supposed good works as our way into heaven.)

But the third slave did not see the Master the same way the others did. He did not have any love in his heart for the Master who loved him. Nor did he trust the Master who entrusted so much to him. Rather than a loving Lord, he viewed Jesus as a terrible taskmaster and overbearing bully. “Master, I knew you to be a hard man..., so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours” (Matt. 25:24-24). In other words, the third slave did not have faith in the

Master. He had no fruit because he had no faith. And so he reaped what he sowed: nothing.

With anger, disappointment, and probably sorrow, the Master rebuked his faithless servant. “You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I ‘reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed’? Then you ought to have invested your money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has abundance. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Matt. 25:26-29).

Then the wicked, lazy, ungrateful slave was thrown out of the Master’s presence into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. In other words, he was literally damned to hell. Separated from his Master for eternity in a place of punishment, he would be utterly alone. Even what he had would be taken away from him (25:29). He had it all, but he threw it away, just like the people who reject Jesus today.

I titled this message “God’s Return.” It’s an intentional pun on the themes of our parable: both the return of the Master (who represents God) at the end of his “journey”; and also the financial return that the Master seeks on his investments. God’s return on Judgment Day. And God’s return from our stewardship of his gifts (*his* talents!).

And the God you see on Judgment Day will be the same God you see today. Some people view God as a forgiving Father, loving Lord, or gracious Master who humbles himself like a servant, becoming obedient even to the point of death on a cross. We trust that God takes care of us, provides for us, rescues us, saves us, and gives us everything we need: above all, himself. And on the Last Day, when Christ returns, we will rejoice at his appearing, knowing that the return of the King means the renewal of all things.

But other people view God as a “hard man,” a malevolent Lord and capricious King. Perhaps they are angry and bitter about some loss or misfortune in their lives, and rather than crying out to God for mercy and strength in the midst of despair and weakness, they push him away, far, far away. Other people complain that God is unfair and unjust to

save some and not others. He is too strict to limit his salvation to only those who believe in Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Who wants to have a God like that, anyway? Others may view God as impotent because of the state of the world, while an increasing number of others doubt or deny that God exists at all. After all, the Master has been gone for so long, how do we really know if there even *is* a Master, or if he's coming back someday?

The God you believe in is the God you get. Either he is a loving Lord or mean Master. Either he will come with his good gift of grace or with damnation and wrath (a "hard man"). So instead of asking you what you're going to do with your talents today or tomorrow, I leave you with this question instead: What kind of Master do you serve? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.